

Ten Thousand Talents and Grace

Sept. 12, 2020 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Psalm 114 | Romans 14:1-12 | Matthew 18:21-35 |

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There are some pieces of scripture that most preachers dread seeing, some that we outright fear, some that can just leave us wondering, “What **is** the Spirit saying to us?”

Like the so-called “clobber passages” in Leviticus used against queer people; the story of Lot, who was invested enough in the laws of hospitality that when an angry mob bent on violence came and demanded that he turn over a visitor, he offered his daughter instead; and that one time when Jesus compared a woman from a different town to a dog... you get the idea]. They can be cringe-worthy, contentious, even triggering.

There are also, of course, moments, teachings and wording that for various reasons, an individual preacher might **personally** feel uncomfortable with; today, we get one of mine. It isn't that the parable itself is “bad” - there is a good strong theme and a deep lesson about forgiveness to be learned here. But... and... I get hung up on the wording.

Maybe it's the deacon in me... maybe it's because I've spent more time lately with antiracism curriculum... maybe it's just that the word, “slave” and everything it stands for, gets my hackles up.

Sometimes when we see the word “slave” in the Bible, we can understand it to mean an indentured servant or bond-servant, someone who works for a very low wage or who is **temporarily** “owned” such as from a debt they couldn't pay, but can expect to eventually earn or buy back their freedom.

When looking at different translations shows that that is the case, I will opt to use the term “servant” so that it isn't misunderstood. But in today's reading, that is **not** the case and I can't pretend it to be otherwise. We know this because of what the king threatens to do.

When the man who cannot pay what he owes is brought before the king in this parable, we read that “his lord ordered him to be **sold**, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.” At the end, when things take a turn for the worse again we hear that, “in anger his lord handed him over to be **tortured** until he would pay his entire debt.”

We can get into the linguistics of this, into the Greek word δοῦλος (*doulos*) and whether it must *always* be translated as “slave,” as some have suggested (though that’s usually a white Fundamentalist viewpoint, which I don’t subscribe to), or can be “bondman,” “servant,” or even “attendant,” as Strong’s Concordance posits (which is an opinion that I personally give more weight to)¹.

But separate from that, I am distracted by the thought of what it does to people of color to hear this word spoken by Jesus. To hear *Emmanuel*, God-among-us, talking so casually about slaves and their masters.

I get that it may have been ubiquitous in his day; Jesus used examples that the everyday person in a given village could relate to. But do WE need to? Does it require the language of enslavement to convey exactly how much trouble this guy was in?

Let’s take a look at it from another angle. What was the “entire debt” that was owed? Since I don’t know a lot about finance and coinage in Biblical times, I didn’t really get what an extreme and even hyperbolic example Jesus is using.

Instead of “slave” and “lord” though, let’s use modern terms that could help show the disparity in power and wealth; let’s try “day laborer” and “billionaire.”

According to Philip Massey, a faculty member at Biola University’s Crowel School of Business, “The denarius was **one** day’s wage for a typical day laborer... so **100** denarii was one-third of a year’s salary, or four months’ wages.” At our current minimum wage, a month’s salary in California is just over \$2,000 a month, or \$24,000 a year. Our day laborer’s fellow worker owed him one-third of a year’s salary, so about \$8,000 - that’s the “small” amount in our story.

¹ Strong, J., & Lindsay, G. (1975). #1401 Doulos. In *Strong's Concordance: Bible Dictionary ; Study of the words of Jesus*. Charlotte, NC.

The larger amount is what the day laborer owed the billionaire - 10,000 talents. I know those words sound odd together, since I'm mixing ancient and modern terms and I didn't get what a ridiculously vast amount of money this was before looking it up, so let's translate it. Massey writes, "Now suppose you continue to work as a day laborer earning 300 denarii each year. After **20 years** of such labor, you will have earned 6,000 denarii" which is: **one** talent." It takes 20 years to earn ONE talent... and you owe ten thousand.

Anyone care to do the math on this? At a day laborer's wage, it would take 200,000 years to pay that back.²

Which gives a little more perspective to just how much forgiving this king - our billionaire - is willing to do. It goes sideways when the day laborer isn't willing to do the same for his co-worker who owes him a far smaller amount. Learning this, the...billionaire becomes angry and punishes the man.

He forgave the debtor's inability to pay... what angered him was the man's unwillingness to then *forgive another* who *owed him*.

We try Lord, we do; but we are human and self-absorbed, and sometimes we just don't get the lesson; we *don't* "hear what the Spirit is saying." This is why we need your grace. And grace comes in so many forms, if we would just open our eyes and ears, to perceive them.

Over the past week, I have come to appreciate all over again **the grace** of breathing; the combination of smoke, heat and asthma has reminded me not to take it for granted. Then I awoke on Wednesday to an eerie, orange glow that held no light - it never changed and felt like a perpetual 7 or 8 pm throughout the day.

In a pattern that is becoming all too familiar, the world around us is again on fire. An unprecedented cloud of smoke and ash **one thousand miles long** has been covering the entire west coast of the country; this is not business as usual.

² Massey, Philip, *The Parable of the Two Debtors in Modern Terms*. The Biola University Chimes, Oct. 27, 2010. <https://chimesnewspaper.com/13189/opinions/parable-two-debtors/>

Some of you have been on evacuation alert for over a week or more; some had to leave your homes or know people who did; some were allowed to return and others won't be able to. We have feared for our beloved church and community, for our neighbors and families, as the flames came within a few scant miles... but *still* there is beauty and grace around us.

Brave and dedicated people have been fighting the blazes, rescuing, feeding and sheltering people, caring for animals... parishioners of St. Columba's have come to gather precious and irreplaceable things from the church to keep them safe, others have contributed time, effort, money, prayer.

We're **watching out for each other**, and we're going to be OK. It also seems to me that what is needed right now in addition to forgiveness - in this time of eerily apocalyptic skies, wildfires, political unrest and Covid - is calm. Rest. Peace. Kindness. Doesn't it feel like you're breathing a little freer, just to hear the words? Calm. Rest. Peace. Kindness.

I saw [a heart-warming video clip](#) recently that someone had posted... it was a man telling the story of how he had been pulled over by a police officer for having paper license plates on his NEW car - which he said, as a Black man, is not an unexpected thing. While he was answering questions and doing what the officer said to, he noticed that a stranger - a white woman - had stopped in her car and had her phone nervously pointed at him, and she was looking distressed. It took him a minute to figure it out and realize that she was **frightened for him** and wanted to be sure he was OK - and to capture the traffic stop on camera in case things did not go well.

The officer took a full 15 minutes to check on the plates and make sure the driver did in fact own the car, and that all was well... and the woman held her phone for that 15 minutes. She was there for him; and he was blown away by her **kindness** and willingness to do so. A stranger.

When he was told he could go, he looked at the woman in the car, and she gave him a questioning face with a tentative thumbs-up; "Are you OK?" He smiled and

returned the thumbs-up and saw how relieved she looked. On his video while he was telling about this, he said, “ You know, as a Black man, you’re not used to your allies... but we’ve really got *allies* now!³

How else might we be allies, neighbors, community for each other? How else might we watch out for one another?

All of Jesus’ teachings - through the various stories they are couched in - can be distilled into one thing: love. Love God, love each other, and love yourself. And to do this, we need to **forgive** - not only one time or seven times, but “**seventy** seven times and more.”

Forgive God for the things you are angry about or don’t understand; for fires that consume homes and forests, wrongs that haven’t been righted, prayers you feel were unanswered. Forgive each other; forgive yourself. Holding on to anger, to hatred, not being willing to forgive; these constrict our being and our breath. Forgiveness and love open it back up; not just spiritually or existentially, but physically.

Take a deep breath in - do it now - hold it in... let it out... take another. There’s nowhere else you need to be right now, in this moment, but here. Present, together, in community. Breathe. Now, “for those who have ears to hear,” listen:

I invite you into the radical notion of treating the rest of this day, this Sunday, as a sabbath. Time to do only what you want to do, what you feel, what you are called to; to allow yourself the luxury of saying “no” to something that would be one thing too many, or that you just don’t feel like doing. Hang out with God for a while; maybe have a heart-to-heart. Find your *Calm Place*, the place where you can seek refuge, and **be there** - even if only in your heart. Invite someone else to join you if you like, even if only in your mind. Put on some music you love and sing aloud - or dance! It’s good for your soul and your lungs, and it lifts your mood. Read or listen to a book... talk to someone you love... find something funny, contemplate the absurd.

³ The Mad King on Twitter, August 3, 2020.
<https://mobile.twitter.com/Kingkeraun/status/1290428862870913024?s=20>

The psalm we read today contains some of my favorite evocative, creatively illustrative lines from scripture, that I think borders on the absurd, and that always make me smile. Listen again:

The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?

There are plenty of things we could spend time being anxious or angry about, and the reasons would be valid... but what if we took a day off? What if, for the rest of today, we let go of our fears and our worries, and gave ourselves permission to just **be**? To not worry about “catching up” on news or housework or any other thing we feel we’ve fallen behind with. What if we just... let. That. Go? I’m not saying forever... just for today. Our epistle says, “observe the day.”

So, do something - or nothing at all - so long as it allows you to **be**, to **breathe**. Seek calm, rest, peace. Extend kindness and forgiveness. Look for Grace. And for today, let’s let that be enough.